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FBI arrests ex-NSA worker accused of spying for Soviets

By John McCaslin
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FBI agents early yesterday morning entered an Annapolis hotel and quietly arrested a former National Security Agency communications specialist who the FBI said had admitted selling "extremely sensitive" information to the Soviet Union.

Ronald William Pelton, 44, who possessed top-secret clearance while employed at the intelligence-gathering agency between 1965 and 1979, admitted under questioning the previous day that he had received money from the Soviets on several occasions, including a $15,000 payoff during a clandestine trip to Vienna, Austria, in 1983, according to an FBI affidavit.

Mr. Pelton, who recently has lived in Northwest Washington and in Silver Spring, yesterday appeared before U.S. Magistrate Daniel E. Klein in Baltimore on charges of gathering and delivering defense information to aid a foreign government.

His espionage activities continued through this year, the FBI said in an affidavit.

On one occasion, the government charged, Mr. Pelton provided specific information relating to a U.S. intelligence collection project targeted at the Soviet Union.

"NSA representatives have confirmed that Pelton had access to extremely sensitive information relating to that project ... the disclosure of which may be potentially damaging to the United States," the affidavit said.

Reagan administration officials yesterday confirmed that it was KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko who identified Mr. Pelton as a Soviet spy. Mr. Yurchenko, who also named another alleged spy who remains at large, "redefected" to Moscow earlier this month.

During FBI interrogation on Sunday, Mr. Pelton admitted meeting with KGB officer Anatoly Slavnov on several occasions between January 1980 and January 1983. As recently as last April, the FBI said, Mr. Pelton made a spy trip to Vienna to meet with a Soviet contact.

Mr. Pelton admitted receiving cash payments from the Soviets on several occasions, including a $15,000 payoff as a result of a 1983 trip to Vienna.

The affidavit said Mr. Pelton's spying began after he went to the Soviet Embassy in Washington in January 1980 offering to sell information. He had serious financial troubles at the time and had filed for bankruptcy in April 1979, according to court records.

Mr. Pelton admitted taking his first trip to Vienna in October 1980. On that and subsequent trips, the FBI said, he spent three to four days in the country, housed at the apartment of the Soviet ambassador to Austria, located within the Soviet Embassy compound.

The FBI said that on both occasions, Mr. Pelton spent about eight hours a day in debriefing sessions with Mr. Slavnov, providing written answers to written questions.

It was during the debriefing sessions, the affidavit said, that Mr. Pelton "was questioned about practically every area of sensitive information to which he had access through his employment at NSA."

NSA records indicate that Mr. Pelton in 1978 authored a classified document concerning technical information about the Soviet Union which, the NSA said, related to U.S. defense. Mr. Pelton told the FBI that his Soviet contact was interested in all programs outlined in the document.

The most secretive and largest of the U.S. intelligence agencies — so secret that the agency refuses to disclose the number of its employees — the NSA monitors communications around the world through electronic listening posts and intelligence-gathering satellites.

The NSA also specializes in cryptography — cracking of secret codes.

A spokesman for NSA, Barbara Prettyman, said yesterday there would be no immediate comment on the case "because all the pieces are not yet together."

In Annapolis, there was amazement that Mr. Pelton — the fourth espionage arrest in five days — had been apprehended in the Chesapeake Bay community.

Nobody at the Hilton Inn Hotel, where Mr. Pelton was arrested, could identify his photograph when a reporter showed it yesterday.

"I am a trained observer and an ex-policeman," said the night desk clerk, "and I can't remember seeing him."

Mr. Pelton is alleged to have been a "yacht dealer," but no one in that tightly knit harbor could identify him.

In an unrelated case yesterday, Anne Henderson-Pollard, charged Friday with assisting her husband in a scheme to sell highly classified documents to a foreign government, was ordered held without bond pending a preliminary hearing tomorrow.

U.S. Magistrate Patrick Attridge said Mrs. Pollard and her husband, Jonathan Jay Pollard, could appear together at the hearing, at which time federal attorneys will have to present sufficient evidence against them to justify holding them for trial.

At that hearing, the Pollards can request that bond be set.

Mr. Pollard faces life in prison if convicted of espionage. His wife has been charged with unauthorized possession of classified documents, and could be sentenced to 10 years in prison and $10,000 fine if convicted.

Yesterday, the short, plump red-haired woman requested that arrangements be made in jail to allow her to take prescription medicine, which she said she had had trouble getting since her arrest Friday.

Her attorney did not contest the decision to order her held without bond.

Staff writers Barnard L. Collier and Michael Hedges contributed to this report.

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